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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's "Dialogic Imagination" and Henry Louis Gates' "Signifying Monkey," an analysis of an African American student's essay reveals codes that are distinct to African Americans. Bakhtin's theory alerts scholars to the extent to which language is a social phenomenon. Ambiguous and heteroglossic, it reflects the ideology, world view, and sense of culture and history of the speaker. A response to Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," the student text, "My Mother's Garden," employs several African American tropes: (1) cultural ideographs, such as "obstacles," "civil rights," and "slavery," all of which have special meaning within the African American community; (2) the talking book, a tradition in which the illiterate speaker must become literate to prove her humanity; (3) call and response, a process through which the student establishes a multi-voiced discourse and signals an intertextual relation between her text and Walker's; (4) signification, a term defined within the African American community as a "mark," an intended victim of a swindle or a taking notice or heed of; and (5) repetition, which is used for emphasis. The point here is that the concept of an academic essay needs to be expanded to make space for different kinds of literacy including that of the African American community. (Student essay is appended.) (TB)

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ED 374 420

Where Did That Come From: Black Talk for Black Texts

CCCC's Conference, Nashville 3/18/94

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I would like to discuss an alternate way of analyzing papers which exhibit African American English (AAE) rhetorical patterns. I became interested in this topic because the subject of "Black English" would come up in various composition-related graduate courses, and in seminar courses for Teaching Assistants (TA's) who tutored or taught writing. However, a conversation I had with Dr. Jerri Scott, director of Central State University's Urban Literacy program, helped me to focus on just what it was about Black English and writing that got to me.

I told her that I used to get D's and F's on my papers in freshman English. I used to go to talk to the instructor, and he'd say "Where did that Come From?: I don't understand what you mean," referring to various AAE-oriented rhetorical patterns I had used, (neither of us knew exactly what was going on in the papers). Dr. Scott said "yeah girl, and when he/she got done helping you, your paper didn't say what you meant." Although I never thought of it as simple as that, there it was. I understood that I had to use Standard English (SE) grammar, why I had to use "ed" to denote past action etc., but instructors could never explain to me why they had to change the meaning in my papers. Thanks to Bakhtin, I have come to see that language is ambiguous or heteroglossic, and that meaning-loss occurs in formal transfer.

I hope to show through an Afrocentric analysis of a student

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text, that ideology, world view, language, culture and history inform AAE-oriented student writing. I draw heavily from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin in his Dialogic Imagination, and Henry Louis Gates' the Signifying Monkey.

The AAE rhetorical patterns that I would like to discuss will be demonstrated through a reading of a student text, "My Mother's Garden" that was a student's response to Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens." The paper was handed out to TA's in a graduate seminar as a part of our class' discussion and practice of grading papers. The AAE rhetorical patterns that I want to demonstrate are : 1)cultural ideographs/use of ideographic language; 2)call/response--identifiable as a structural device in that the discourses of the student-author and the author of the primary text become intertextualized; 3a) Signifyin(g)--in the sense of formal revision of a recurrent trope of the black experience, the Talking Book (here, revised as the literacy as freedom theme); 3b)signifyin(g)--in the sense that language is used in such a way that traditional concepts are emptied of their meanings and reinvested with meanings that correspond to the speaker/writer's reality, occurring in the form of (un)naming; and 3c) signifyin(g) in the sense of double-voicedness; and 4)repetition.

Cultural ideographs are terms or symbols that have shared meaning for AAE speakers. As we can learn from Bakhtin, language is a living social phenomenon, shaped by the context in which it emanates and occurs. There is a movement of theme through

different languages and speech types and its dispersion into "social heteroglossia" (in this student's text, the theme is the black experience and the speech type is AAE). Heteroglossia refers to the meanings that can be assigned to particular concepts or terms because of the conditions within which a term is uttered, or its context. Here, from the outstart, the student-author gives information which will direct us to the subordinate, the subculture, the Black vernacular. She draws upon culturally established ideographs such as "obstacles" (line 1), "civil rights" (line 4), and "slavery" (line 6) which are a part of the African American experience. In the AAE communities these terms denote and connote more than in the SE speaking communities. For example, the term "slavery" may be synonymous with "slave trade" from a SE perspective, whereas from a Black perspective the utterance could be interpreted as "holocaust" or "genocide." Her evocation of "obstacles" refers to discrimination of the kind only African Americans have experienced, the kind of discrimination in which the very laws of the land make it legal to oppress the African (See Semi Valley verdict, Jim Crow of the past, "slavery," and events that necessitated the "civil rights" movement).

By invoking this shared understanding, the student-author can be identified as a Caller. Her chorus is composed of those who can identify the code in which she speaks. This gesture also invokes the African worldview or perspective or the text of Blackness, and expresses an ideological stance because language is rooted in culture.

After opening up the text of Blackness, the student further grounds herself in the AAE literary tradition by revising a significant theme of the Black experience, which can be traced back to slave narratives, the trope of the Talking Book. The student-author's consciousness seizes the Talking Book trope found in Walker's essay. In the tradition of the Talking Book, the protagonist is illiterate and thus looked upon as being less than human (Gates 1988). In order to prove their worthiness of freedom and acceptance into humanity, literacy became the slave's life goal. The student recognizes this theme, the quest for literacy and freedom in Walker's protagonist (ll. 15-24). As Walker praises the "artistic qualities" of oppressed Black mothers, the student author validates this by revising the Talking Book trope, linking her experience to the conditions which created the Black vernacular.

The play with this trope begins the call/response nature of multi-voiced discourse and signals an intertextual relation between Walker's and the student's texts: hence, we have here formal signification. It is indeed difficult to separate this form of signifyin(g) from call/response in this instance because the student's revision of the trope or particularization of it to her own experience is a response to Walker's call. Not only is the student a Caller but she is also a part of the chorus because she has heeded Walker's call. The call/response ritual is the African American way of showing active participation in a discursive event. Auditors are expected to respond aloud and show emotion. In this

context, the incorrect thing to do is not respond (See Smitherman, 1977). And so, the student-author responds by testifying to the validity of Walker's discourse.

In responding to Walker's call, the student begins her discourse on a "special lady" who had to overcome many obstacles, (found in ll 33-60) poverty and substandard housing (exemplified in sharecropping life), alcoholism (father affecting family), oppressive experiences with educational institutions, and alienation in the quest for freedom and literacy (ridiculed by schoolmates and faculty), poor nutrition. All of these are prerequisites for being seen as subhuman and the need to transcend this status by demonstrating literacy, or at least the ability to be articulate.

The use of the term "special lady" (line 26) alerts us to the fact that something else is going on with the student's use of language. As you will see, the student is signifyin(g). What makes a poor, working class ex-share cropper special?: surviving with dignity. As did the slave, "special lady" must prove her literacy in order to pass the test of civility, in order to make it in mainstream America. We do not know if the "special lady" acquires a full traditional education; but we do know that she acquired a title--"Housekeeping Director Supervisor of Oak Park Health Care Center" ll. 90-1). On a first level of meaning, the title "Housekeeping Director" denotes a menial, low status job. However, we know that the title was attained through demonstration of "artistry," "creativity" and "qualities" (ll 100-02). In order

for this woman to be placed in a supervisory position, someone else saw her as competent, as a human among humans, thus making her accountable for other humans. In other words, she demonstrated her literacy, her humanity or "mother wit" as it is called in the AAE communities.

Furthermore, the student-author anticipates that her readers need not know the birth-name of this lady, as it will not demonstrate the lady's evolution from object to subject, as vividly as the example of evolution from anonymous to a supervisory title. She wants us to know her as "special lady," "Mother," and of course "Housekeeping Director." Thus, "Housekeeping Director" is emptied of its standard meaning and is invested with an opposite or vernacular meaning and has been reappropriated or (un)named. Kimberly Benston explains the recurring motif of (un)naming as the affirmation of a new consciousness.

Further examples of the use of culturally charged, double-voiced-language can be cited in the student's celebration of triumph over subordination and the Black females' metronymic experience. In the following examples, signifyin(g) will be identified in the form of double-voicedness. As we learn from Dr. Gates, the SE term "signification is a homonym of the Black vernacular word "Signification." As Gates tells us, some ingenious group of AAE speakers emptied the conventional meaning of its received contents and replaced them with this particular signifier. By doing this, the AAE tradition created a homonymic pun, distinguishing its sense of difference from the rest of the English

community of speakers. The very meaning of meaning is being questioned by a literal critique of white meaning; however, concepts cannot be fully divorced from their relation to a signifier (the term itself). The homonym depends on the "absent presence" of received concepts associated with a signifier. According to Gates, signifyin(g) may be used to critique an imbalance of power. In our example here, the use of the term "mark" (11.97-8) is one such signifier.

Here, the student is summing up the experience of all women of African descent by simply invoking terms that trip the register of the Black female experience in this country. It is interesting to note the SE definition of this word and its vernacular counterpart. In Webster's, the SE definition is: "mark- a visible trace or impression on a surface produced by drawing, coloring, stamping [or]...a sign, symbol, or indication of some quality, character."

In the Black vernacular, "mark" is "an intended victim of a swindle [or] a taking notice [or] heed," among other things. "The mark" or the student (and Walker) becomes a part of the legacy. First of all, she is "marked" by her mother's race or culture, which is usually associated with the lower rung of society. Secondly, she is marked by an oppressive relationship with educational institutions which enforce upon her an alien culture which ridicules her (as we see in lines 56-60). Hence, any woman predisposed to these "marks" is the "intended victim of a swindle." These are the obstacles which the student Walker and I will have to overcome.

In order to achieve her goals and dreams, the student must do as slaves, ex-slaves and her mother have done: she must achieve mental, physical and economic freedom. She must see "obstacles as a part of life" (line 119). In the vernacular, an obstacle is something that must not stand in one's way (line 118).

As a final example of Black vernacular language use, repetition is used for emphasis. The student's use of the term "dream" nine times suggests the student's awareness that she, as did her mothers, will need a massive portion of this ingredient (line 61 2x;line 78 2x;line 93 1x; line 110 1x; line 112 2x; line 114 1x;. The student now understands that she stands on the shoulders of courageous ones who have put her in the position to become a "registered nurse" (116). In other words, she must become an "artist." In the vernacular, an artist is one who makes something of herself despite opposition. An artist is comprised of "dreams," "goals," "obstacles," and yes, cultural literacy: thus, the student's language use reveals a critique of an imbalance of power--she is Signifyin(g).

Read for its adherence to an Afrocentric paradigm, it becomes apparent that the student's paper is excellent and has meanings that cannot be discerned by a traditional reading. No doubt there are other linguistic phenomena happening in this student's paper. My goal here was to show that the concept of the academic essay needs to be expanded, thereby making space for different kinds of literacy. I think that Bakhtin's position, that texts must be understood in the appropriate contexts, lends itself to

multicultural and Afrocentric educational philosophies. Bakhtin states that any study of "verbal art" or stylistics must recognize form and content as one. Ignorance of the social aspect of discourse perpetuates narrowly informed analyses which come off as flat. The conditions which are relevant to the proposed reading of AAE-oriented student texts include a recognition of the Black experience as it is revealed by the students' use of language. Hence, the historical, ideological, and sociological context which one associates with an utterance influences its meaning. If we can accept the premise that discourse patterns are socially informed, we can also see that one's culturally acquired rhetorical stance is informed by and expresses a certain ideological stance. When instructors fix on form or structure the full potential of the message is lost. Such analyses fail to reveal layers of meaning that exist beyond surface level.

Bakhtin's language philosophies identify revision of forms as an all embracing human phenomenon, but Gates' concept of Signifyin(g) helps to guide our interpretations of AAE-oriented student texts, in particular. According to Gates, all Black texts are inherently mulatto, products of both Western and African conventions. Thus, discourse of this union naturally enters into ideological dialogue. Ideologic dialogue involves the process of transforming externally persuasive, authoritative discourse into internally persuasive discourse, or "retelling a text in one's own words."

By telling texts in their own words, students are forced to

investigate, revise and re-envision their own ideology, to affirm, reaffirm or discard that which has or does not have validity for their own experience. In other words, students revise the academic essay as they struggle to bring their own internally persuasive discourse (AAE rhetoric) to bear on the authoritative discourse with which the mainstream culture and the classroom provide them.

The AAE rhetorical patterns that I have described are extrapolated from AAE oral tradition: hence, my title, "Where Did that Come From: Black Talk for Black Texts." If we make ourselves aware of Black language use and Afrocentric paradigms we can help students become aware of their orientation to language and to draw upon the tradition. By doing this, we can develop strategies to help students share their thoughts and experiences with a broader audience.

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My Mother's Garden

Many times in life, people seem to let obstacles deter them from their goals. If it weren't for the courageous hearts and overwhelming strength of the many civil rights activist for example, the African-American race might still be in the chains and shackles that once held them in slavery. As one can see, the achievement of a goal requires a sturdy foundation made of determination and strength. In a sense, a goal can be seen as a flower in a garden. Once its foundation is rooted into the soil, it must be enriched with sunrays of determination and watered with everlasting strength. The end result is a beautiful flower that has blossomed, or in other words, a goal that has been successfully reached.

In Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," she speaks about how the artistic qualities that many black women possessed went unknown because of the conditions they were in during a time of segregation and inequalities. Walker asks the question

How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write (586)?

The answer to this question has brought to mind a very special lady to me who survived the struggles of growing up in the south as a black woman. She has taught me that I can reach all of my goals regardless of the obstacles that may stand in my way.

She was one of ten children who were raised in the rural area of Childerberg, Alabama from 1947 through the summer of 1965. She lived a very difficult life. The only way for her and her family to survive was to work as sharecroppers-people who work the land and crops of landowners in return for about $500.00 a year and unfit housing that didn't have toilets, running water, or insulation to keep warm. Her childhood days weren't filled with fun and laughter, but endless days of picking cotton as the beaming hot sun darkened her tender skin. After the cotton had been picked for the year, she would have the opportunity to attend school if circumstances went well. Her father who was an alcoholic often mismanaged the family's money leaving nothing to provide for his eleven children. They could afford the bare necessities, which weren't a pair of shoes to protect their feet during cold winter days. This forced her to miss school for long periods of time and then struggle to catch back up. Her house wasn't warmed by heat on cold winter nights, but chilled by brisk winds that blew through the large opening

throughout her deprived house. Her christmas spirit was dampened many years when Santa didn't bring her and orange and nuts [sic] that she wanted so much, when he knew she had been good all year. She didn't wake to appetizing meals but a simple biscuit with gravy. She wasn't seen as one of the "popular girls," at school (when she was able to go) but as a girl who wasn't even considered decent enough to sit by or say hello to. She was constantly ridiculed by students and falculty [sic] as she longed just to have a friend. In spite of the painful life she lived, she had a dream. A dream that she knew would come alive because she was going to make it happen.

Walker spoke of the conditions of women and how "they ... become mothers of children, without fulfillment" (585). This was very true in this woman's case. At the young age of six, she no longer was filled with the joy that came from her mother's warm embrace or tender kiss. Instead, she was filled with sorrow and the pain of no longer having a mother to fulfill her emotional needs. Her mother died from internal bleedings caused by having tôo many children. The eleven children's lives she left behind were unfulfilled not because she didn't love them, but because she wasn't there to give them the love that they needed.

It was after her mother's death that she created her dream. Her dream was to someday have children and a family of her own. She wanted to be the best mother and wife that she could possibly be despite the life she had to live. She wanted to be a mother who would provide all the love and care that her children would ever need. She wanted to be the mother who could provide her kids with the most simplistic necessities to some of their fondest desires. She wanted to be a loyal and faithful wife to her husband so that her and her husband both could raise a happy family together. She accomplished more than just having a wonderful family with children she loves and cares for. Today she holds the position of Housekeeping Director/ Supervisor of Oak Park Health Care Center. This woman was able to conquer and defeat all odds that stood in her way and made her dream come alive. This woman was my mother. She was able to root her goal into her heart and gain a successful life. She is now rooted within me. I am the beautiful flower growing her garden. I am the mark she has left for all society to see.

The way Alice Walker searched for the root of her mother's creativity and artistry- or to be more general, of the black woman, reminds me of the way I discovered these qualities in my mother. I agree with Walker when she says "I found, while thinking about the far reaching world of the creative black woman, that

often the truest answer to what really matters can be found very close" (589). To find the roots of my mother's garden was very easy because they were present in the many stories she had told me about her life. I consider my mother to be an artist because of the determination she had to make her dream come alive. My mother had nothing as a child to call her own. All she had was a dream to believe in. She took her dream, and through the creativity she possessed, she made her dream become reality. The life of my mother makes me realize that I can accomplish my goals of one day becoming a successful registered nurse and having a wonderful family of my own. She has taught me that I must not let anything stand in my way, and that I should consider obstacles as a part of life. This is why I consider my mother to be a true artist.